DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 374 182 UD 030 057

AUTHOR Bensman, David
TITLE Direct Assessment of a Progressive Public Elementary School: Graduates of Central Park East.
SPONS AGENCY Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, New York, N.Y.; EXXON Corp., New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Economically Disadvantaged; Educational Improvement; *Educationally Disadvantaged; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; *Outcomes of Education; Parent Participation; Program Evaluation; *Progressive Education; Public Education; Success; Teacher Student Relationship; *Urban Education
IDENTIFIERS New York City Board of Education

ABSTRACT

This report provides an assessment of the Central Park East (CPE) elementary school (in New York City) effort, an effort by teachers who believed that the "progressive education" that worked for the children of the wealthy and privileged in many private and suburban schools could work equally well for poor and working-class children. Study data suggest that graduates of the Central Park East elementary school achieved substantially higher high school completion and college entrance rates than did the population selected for comparison--the total New York City public school population. The report identifies three dimensions (mentioned by the students themselves) for this success. First, teachers helped students develop pathways to learning, starting from interests that students brought from home or discovered in the classroom. Second, members of the school staff, in their personal interactions with students, demonstrated that they cared about the students as human beings. Finally, although CPE was established by teachers searching for an opportunity to put their own ideas about teaching and learning into action, the role of parents as partners and allies increased steadily. A personal account of one student is presented to emphasize these points. Contains 44 references. (GLR)

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ED 374 182

Direct Assessment of a Progressive Public Elementary School: Graduates of Central Park East

by David Bensman
Rutgers University

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The Central Park East elementary school was launched in 1974 by teachers who believed that the "progressive education" which worked for the children of the wealthy and privileged in many private and suburban schools could work equally well for the predominantly poor and working class children of color who attended East Harlem's public schools.* Veterans of the City College Workshop on Open Education and other progressive teacher training programs, these teachers had developed an educational philosophy based on the theoretical perspectives of Dewey and Piaget: that knowledge is not transmitted from teacher to learner, but is rather constructed by students; that learning consists of solving problems suggested by your own mind rather than remembering what someone in authority has told you; and that children learn more when they are supported and encouraged by teachers and parents to create their own paths to knowledge than when they

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1. David Bensman, "Quality Education in the Inner City: The Story of the central Park East School." Center for Collaborative Education. New YOrk, 1987, 1992, pp. 7-11; Sy Fliegel with James MacGuire, Miracle in East Harlem: The Fight for Choice in Public Education. Times Books. New York, 1993, pp. 42-49.

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follow a required curriculum developed by others.[2]

How successful was this effort to implement child-centered educational practices within a huge public school system? While experts have occasionally hailed CPE classrooms, no reliable data a existed to show whether or not CPE graduates were making unusually good academic progress. To fill this gap, in the Spring of 1990, I, an historian on the faculty of Rutgers University, led a research team hoping to answer some basic questions about CPE's impact. We were funded by a grant from the Exxon Foundation, that was later supplemented by the Mellon Foundation.

In order to determine whether or not CPE was effective, we adopted a two-part research strategy. First, we sought to develop a broad base of demographic and achievement information about as many graduates as possible by telephoning each of the graduates and asking them a series of questions for about fifteen minutes.

But we were not satisfied with surveying as many graduates as possible, for while a fifteen minute telephone conversation might tell us how many students graduated from high school and went to college, and how many left school and went to work, it could not tell us how graduates understood their own experiences. Thus, the second part of our research project was aimed at providing depth of understanding, as opposed to breadth of coverage. Encouraged by Patricia Carini, founder of the Prospect

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2. Jon Snyder, Ann Lieberman, Maritza B. Macdonald, and A. Lin Goodwin, "Makers of Meaning in a Learning-Centered School: A Case Study of Central Park East I Elementary School." National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching. New York, 1992.

School and Archive, a research center located in North Bennington, Vermont, we decided to conduct open-ended, in-person interviews with a subset of the graduate population.

I was ultimately able to obtain basic demographic and achievement data on 117 of the 135 graduates of Central Park East in the years 1978-83 (86.7% of the total population.) According to these data, CPE graduates compiled an impressive record of educational success. Almost all of them graduated from high schools or received a GED.*

Table I. High School Completion Rates of CPE Graduates

Status	#	%
High School Diploma	98	83.8
GED	13	11.1
Did not Graduate	5	4.3
Still in School	1	0.9

Source: 1990 Survey of Graduates

By a second measure of school progress, the college attendance rate, the CPE graduates' success was equally impressive: nearly two-thirds (65.8%) began college.

The data so briefly summarized above indicate that CPE graduates achieved high rates of school progress compared to public school students of comparable socio-economic backgrounds. (In the complete report on this research, I used the New York City public school population as a basis for comparison.) But

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3. I reported on this data in a paper presented to the AERA national meeting in San Francisco in 1991. At that meeting, I discussed limitations of the study, the representativeness of the data, and the methodology employed to collect the data. This paper will not repeat that discussion, but will focus instead on the graduates' explanations about how Central Park East helped them grow academically, socially, and emotionally.

when the graduates themselves assessed how their elementary school experience contributed to their lives, they did not limit their assessment to the academic sphere; indeed, they cited gains in their emotional strength and social skills as prominently as they did school progress. Furthermore, the graduates described gains in the academic sphere as being inseparable from those in the emotional and social sphere; growth in one accompanied and was made possible by growth in the other. Over and over again, students told me that their teachers provided the support and encouragement they needed to discover an interest and develop a skill; as they developed and became recognized for a skill, their self-esteem improved and they took on greater academic challenges.*

In effect, students told me that if I want to explain their high rates of academic achievement, I must look at the school as more than an academic environment, with its own a curriculum and teaching practices. Rather, I should examine it as a learning community where adults structured the relationships between adults and children, and among the students, in order to foster the students' academic growth as well as their emotional and social development.

Graduates identified three dimensions of this learning

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4. For a related view, see Nel Noddings, The Challenge to Care in Schools. Teachers College Press. New York, 1992. Noddings' argument is somewhat different than the one I present here in that she presents the child's social/emotional growth as an important but separate goal of education, whereas my argument is that academic and and social/emotional growth are intertwined. James Comer also stresses the importance of education in fostering children's emotional and social growth, but in Comer's argument, social and emotional growth is instrumental; its importance is that it makes academic growth possible. By contrast, CPE graduates argued that social and emotional growth is important in its won right, as well as for its contribution to academic growth. See James P. Comer, "Is 'parenting' essential to good teaching?" NEA Today, 6 (1988), pp. 34-40.

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environment as being especially important:

First, teachers helped students develop pathways tc learning, starting from interests students brought from home or discovered in the classroom.

Second, members of the school staff, in their personal interactions with students, demonstrated that they cared about them as human beings. The CPE community structured relationships based on caring, respect, and mutual trust. Graduates drew on these relationships to create pathways to emotional and social growth. Furthermore, CPE was able to bridge racial and cultural divides; the "integrationist" ethic of CPE's founders flourished in a world where integration as a social ideal was losing its luster.

Third, while CPE was established by teachers searching for an opportunity to put their own ideas about teaching and learning into action, the role of parents as partners and allies increased steadily. Parents of graduates described not only why they chose to send their children to CPE but also how their initial enthusiasm for the school propelled them to support it in a variety of ways -- through political action and fund raising as well as educational support activities. The parents' enthusiasm for CPE's academic and nonacademic programs challenged some of the study's initial assumptions about parental resistance to progressive education.

Finally, as graduates talked about what they are doing now and what they hoped to do in the future, as they described their triumphs and setbacks, their hopes and dreams for themselves and their children, some of whom are now entering elementary school

themselves, graduates testified that CPE's founders successfully passed on their legacy -- a belief in the dignity of the individual and the value of cooperative effort; commitment to social equality and cultural diversity; and respect for the human spirit's creativity and the American citizen's communal responsibility.

Kathy's Story

In order to make these rather abstract statements about CPE's learning environment more concrete, and to give a flavor of the two hour interviews, here is an excerpt from an interview I conducted with one of the graduates, Kathy Title. I spoke with Kathy in her parents' cooperative apartment, located at 110th Street and First Avenue in East Harlem, where Kathy has lived since she entered the fifth grade in 1977.

"Before I went to CPE in fifth grade, I was a mess because I hated school. I was going to a Lutheran school, The School on the Hill on 145th Street in Harlem. It was not a very fun place to be at all. During the third grade, I must have missed two weeks of school out of every month. I would get sick. My mother says I would actually come down with something legitimate, and I would have to stay home for a week or two. It never failed.... They labeled me a sickly child and I had never been sick before....We had a teacher in third grade who came from the old, old way things were done. If you didn't do this right, you got spanked with rulers. My mother and father never hit me. I think that's what turned me off from that place. Fourth grade, it got better but it still wasn't fun.

"Once I was at CPE, I would be so upset if I got sick and couldn't go to school. That's how much fun it was. You just got up and you looked forward to going to school. I had never, even in first and second grade, [at the Modern School in Harlem], looked forward to going to school. CPE actually made it fun.

"My teacher for fifth and sixth grade, Alice [Seletsky], was the sweetest person in the world. You didn't have somebody telling you, 'you have to do this.' You could make your way around the room at your own pace. If you liked to read, you could spend a little bit more time reading. Or if you liked math, you could do that. It was more like I was doing this on my own. It made you feel more independent and it gave you more confidence in yourself. My mother was pretty happy when she found that school.

"I don't remember reading as much before CPE. What really started me to reading was Alice would read a book every day. We had our own private reading session. Then she would read to us. It exposed me to so many different books.

"What things helped me to learn? When I was in CPE, in sixth grade, Russ Seymour [the Assistant Director] got Tina Pittman and myself, the Two Musketeers, interested in reading poetry. It was Tina who first started this. Since we were

always together, I did it, but I always had a feeling she was a little bit better at it than I was because I didn't really enjoy doing it too much. One day, Russ asked, 'what do you think we should do for Black History month?' It popped into my head that maybe when we had those after lunch school sings, we could sing the black national anthem. ["Lift Every Voice to Sing"] Russ didn't know what it was, or maybe he knew what it was but he just wanted to hear us sing it, so I started singing it, and he said, 'that was incredible. I never knew that you could sing.' I didn't know. 'You have to sing,' he said. 'I have to take you over to Barry [Soloway, the music teacher].'

"Barry told me that Russ wanted me to sing it for him. I was really self-conscious about this, and I didn't want to do it, but I sung it and Barry said, 'you have a very beautiful voice. Maybe we can work with something.' After that, every time we had a school event, I sang. Then I thought, 'hey, I'm finally good at something on my own. It's not something Tina and I are doing together, it's just me.' So that really gave me self-confidence. I had something that I was good at besides reading a book. So I started singing better and getting into acting. It made me want to read different types of things. It changed my whole outlook on everything.

"Before that, most of what I read was only fictional things, like Judy Blume books. Then I started becoming interested in history, poetry by different authors, mostly Afro-American stuff. Russ had given me an album by a singer. It was Afro-American related and it got me interested in a whole lot of other things. Every time we wanted to know about something, Russ or Alice would bring in a book that had it there. It broadened our horizons a little bit. Everything wasn't a fiction book that had a happy ending.

"I had a lot of support from my mom, but it wasn't that direct support from my dad. Russ was there to tell you, 'you did a good job.' If he was proud of you and happy with you, he didn't have a problem with giving you a hug. Even if you didn't do anything that made him proud, if you needed a hug, he would be there to give you a hug and tell you, 'don't worry, you can do it,' or whatever needed to be said. And I know he is such a good father to his little girls.

"It's strange; when I was looking for a school to put my daughter, it never even dawned on me that the School on the Hill was a totally black run school. CPE was a more realistic setting, because you have to encounter different people at every stage of your life. You should be prepared for that. It prepared me a lot, because I ended up going away to a predominantly white high school. I was a little bit better able to handle it than someone who went to a school that was predominantly black.

"At CPE, I was exposed to not only white teachers but white students who became friends. For example, I went to spend a night at Heather Bush's house just about every other weekend. My

friends from this community couldn't understand my relationship with Heather, but we had fun. It's important to learn that you can be friends, that race doesn't have to be a barrier. You get exposed to doing different things, like I'd go spend a night at her house. We'd go to a museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Museum of Natural History. Heather and I did it. It shows you that there were a lot more things going on than what you see in your community. That's what I think CPE was. Also, we were allowed to go down and help with the younger kids, so it made you feel like you had responsibility to look out for them. You felt independent in being able to do it, and you felt responsible being able to take care of the kids. It gave you so much more self confidence. They build upon it, even to the point where if I wanted to do something, I'd go to Alice and say, 'Alice, Tina and I have an idea....'

"It was a journal entry that I made that suggested that we organize a group of girls to discuss sex. Alice read it, and she came back, and we did organize a group, and she did allow us the time to take from the day and go and discuss this. We worked it out amongst ourselves. We discussed it ourselves. Alice was there, and filled in all our questions. We read books. She sent out permission slips to the parents, to find out if it was okay for her to give us this type of material to read. My mother said, 'this is a great idea.' Alice gave us these books. The books cleared up so many things. I don't know whether it's because other kids tell kids things, but things get really messed up. It's like the telephone game. Somebody tells you one thing, and by the time you get it, it's totally something different. So we did that.

"Alice was somebody you could tell everything to, even things that I wouldn't tell Tina. Alice was one of those teachers that you only get once in a lifetime. You can't tell your mother everything; you can't tell your mother things you could tell your sister; you can't tell your teacher things you could tell your mother; but when you have that person all in one, you can tell them anything. That's the type of person she was."

Kathy's chronicle contains many of the elements of the CPE success saga. Her mother, a working-class African-American, chose to send Kathy to Central Park East because she was faring poorly in school. Even though she was at CPE for only two years, her experience there boosted her self-esteem, and helped her to develop strong academic interests and skills. The assistant principal's respect for Kathy caused him to ask for her suggestion about what song would be appropriate for a school celebra-

tion of an African-American theme. His sensitivity to her musical talent and concern for her development spurred him to refer Kathy to a music teacher. This teacher's willingness to spend time with Kathy helped her to develop her musical talent. Kathy's public performances enhanced her self-confidence. Meanwhile, the assistant principal followed up on Kathy's interest in African-American music by providing her with additional materials on African-American history and culture. Kathy's classroom teacher, who worked with her for two years, reinforced her interest in literature by reading aloud a variety of books that opened Kathy's eyes to new worlds. Kathy's growing interests and self-confidence enabled her to excel in school, and to win a scholarship through a program called "A Better Chance" to attend St. Andrew's Prep School in Middletown, Delaware (Picture the campus where "Dead Poet's Society" was filmed).

After graduating from St. Andrew's Kathy attended the University of Pennsylvania. Now at age 23, she is working at NYNEX in a skilled position, earning a salary in excess of $35,000, and participates in a management training program. She is the mother of two children; the elder child attends Central Park East.

Conclusion

The evidence collected via surveys and interviews indicate that graduates of the Central Park East elementary school achieved substantially higher high school completion and college entrance rates than did the population selected for comparison -- the total New York City public school population. Furthermore,

graduates testified that the school's contribution to their emotional and social growth was as great as its contribution to their academic progress. In short, the evidence vindicates the founding teachers' belief that child-centered pedagogy could be as effective in helping poor and working class children of color as it has been in helping students in private and suburban schools.*

It would be wrong to hold up the Central Park East described here as a model, however. The strategies and structures developed by the CPE faculty in the years 1974-83 represent attempts to the meet the needs of students and teachers in those years; since then, American society has changed, and CPE's current students and teachers reflect those changes. Over the past decade, CPE has evolved new strategies and structures to meet emerging needs and problems.*

At the same time, CPE has been spreading its message. In 1980 Central Park East II was created to meet growing demand in East Harlem; in 1982, River East, another sister school in East Harlem was organized by people closely connected to the Central Park East schools. The three schools conduct admissions jointly. Furthermore, in 1985, some CPE staff created a secondary school, CPESS, which has now had three classes of high school graduates.

On a national scale, through the Center for Collaborative

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5. To be certain about what caused the students' high rates of high school completion and college entrance, a controlled study would be necessary.

6. See for example, Bruce Kanze's article, "Urban Conversations," in Progressive Education for the 1990's: Transforming Practice, edited by Kathe Jervis Carol Montag, Teachers College Press, New York. 1991.

Education, present and former Central Park East staff provide technical assistance to parents and educators who wish to establish child-centered schools. In the small workshops and large conferences sponsored by the Center for Collaborative Education, the progressive tradition pioneered by John Dewey continues to inspire new generations to create democratic learning communities where children's needs and ideas are taken seriously.

(A fuller report of this study of CPE graduates will be published by the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching at Teachers' College, Columbia University, later in 1994)

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